

Creating a Sense of Glorious Destiny. Mastery of Speech in the *Libellus de Situ Civitatis Mediolani* (Late 10th-Early 11th Centuries)

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In the decades around 1000, an anonymous cleric at Milan Cathedral wrote a booklet on the history of his city which he built as a collection gathering, in chronological order, the Lives of the local bishops. The unfinished work not only testifies to the learning and culture of the author but also to the historical relevance of an ambitious text commissioned to support the political claims and the legitimacy of the Milanese church in its quest for primacy in the kingdom of Italy. This chapter explores the refined style of the author and the ways in which he constructed a coherent and cohesive narrative by sewing together individual biographies. The medieval reception of this biographical collection also shows the ways in which the text was repurposed to fulfil different functions and multiple goals, both within and beyond the city of Milan. Finally, this study analyses the text in the light of two interpretative concepts borrowed from the field of social anthropology. *De situ* clearly appealed to the literary tastes of the scholars trained in the cathedral school, thus addressing an audience shaped as a specific »community of learning«. More generally, the collection contributed to nourishing the sense of identity of the clergy and the people of Milan, that is a »textual community« which, through the acts of reading and listening to the text, felt it belonged to that glorious history and expected to see its reflection in the present.

Keywords: medieval Italy, Church history, hagiography, institutional history, manuscript studies, textual transmission, rhetoric, communities of learning, textual communities, history of origins.

The history of the early Christian origins of the city of Milan was first narrated in the so-called *Booklet on the description of the city of Milan (Libellus de situ civitatis Mediolani, henceforth De situ)*, which was written by an anonymous compiler between the late 10th and the early 11th century.¹ *De situ* retraces the history of the foundation and organisation of the Milanese metropolitan Church from apostolic times up to the early 4th century by focusing on the episcopacies of its early bishops, whose Lives are ordered chronologically and presented

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1 The sources pertaining to the history of the apostolic origins of Milan have been thoroughly studied by Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*. The edition of *De situ* used throughout this chapter was prepared by Alessandro and Giuseppe Colombo and published in 1952 as part of the collection *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 2nd edition, tome I, part 2.

in separate chapters. Unfortunately, the compilation is incomplete, ending abruptly before the death of the sixth Milanese bishop, Maternus (*ep.* 316-28). This sudden interruption appears to be accidental, however, judging by the dedicatory letter introducing *De situ*, where the author explicitly declares his intention to continue the narrative up to the present times and to the episcopacy of the archbishop who commissioned the work from him.²

As far as can be reconstructed from the surviving manuscript evidence, *De situ* comprises a dedicatory letter outlining authorial strategies and goals, a historical preface dedicated to the description of the city of Milan, the story of the latter's evangelisation by the apostle Barnabas and the biographies of the first six local bishops. Interestingly, only one 15th-century manuscript (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, H 56 sup.) contains the text in its entirety, while all the other sixteen *codices* include only a selection of the different chapters: in some cases they are presented in the original chronological order, in others the individual sections have been reshuffled and integrated into different collections such as hagiographic legendaries and liturgical handbooks.³

De situ belongs to a popular historiographic genre in Christian medieval Europe: the *Gesta episcoporum* (*Deeds of bishops*).⁴ According to the typology of this source, the narrative follows the succession of bishops in a given city from the foundation of the local episcopal church up to the time of writing. The *Gesta episcoporum* thus firmly anchored history in the urban landscape and contributed to shaping influential ideas and ideals concerning the ways in which a bishop should take care of the community entrusted to him, how he should administer his church's wealth and the ecclesiastical province under his authority, and also how he should represent, defend and promote the interests of his institution in the larger geopolitical arena. The earliest and most influential work of this genre was produced in 6th-century Rome: the *Liber Pontificalis* (*Book of Pontiffs*) recounted the Lives of the bishops of Rome, i.e. the popes, presenting them in chronological order from the time of St Peter, and was more or less regularly updated until the end of the 9th century.⁵ The wide dissemination of the Roman *Liber Pontificalis* across medieval Europe ensured its popularity, which also relied on the authority and the prestige of the papacy, and it thus set an influential example of the ways in which the history and memory of a local episcopal church could be shaped, preserved and promoted.⁶ The Milanese *Gesta episcoporum* therefore builds on a long-standing and authoritative tradition of local institutional histories which identify the city and its most powerful urban institution (the episcopal church) as their main focus and object of interest.⁷ The compiler of the Milanese *De situ* explicitly acknowledges that he is working within the framework of this genre in his dedicatory letter, in which he declares to have followed the model of the Roman *Liber Pontificalis*:

2 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 4. All translations provided in this chapter are my own.

3 For an overview of the manuscripts transmitting *De situ*, see Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 19-30. On manuscript transmission, see also below, 204-206. For an introduction to hagiographic collections, see Philippart, *Les légendiers latins*, while the relevant liturgical books are treated in Martimort, *Les «ordines»*.

4 On this literary genre, see Sot, *Gesta episcoporum* as well as the articles gathered in the more recent volume Bougard and Sot (eds.), *Liber, Gesta, Histoire*.

5 On the genesis of the Roman *Liber Pontificalis* see McKitterick, *Rome and the Invention of the Papacy*; Geertman, *La genesi del Liber Pontificalis* and Verardi, *La memoria legittimante*, while on the influence of this work, see McKitterick, *La place du Liber Pontificalis*.

6 See again Geertman, *La genesi del Liber Pontificalis* as well as Noble, *Literacy and the Papal Government*. For an example of the ways in which papal biographies could be written to respond to present-day challenges, see McKitterick, *Papacy and Byzantium*.

7 Sot, *Local and Institutional History*, 89-91.

In like manner, the most famous Pope Damasus once wrote a text on the catalogue of the Roman episcopal city at the request and with the encouragement of St Jerome, the most skilled interpreter of the Holy Scripture, [and wrote that] in the same way in which he [i.e. Jerome] had diligently written »On the illustrious men«.⁸

The anonymous author declares that the preservation of memory and presentation of worthy models for the benefit of future generations are the main goals of writing history. He furthermore insists on the importance of eloquence in the retelling of the past:

Admirable feats and deeds deserving the greatest of praise acquire further merit thanks to the ability with which they are narrated. If a dry source of words sets about to illustrate the deeds of the most excellent [men], their memory is either completely extinguished by the passing of time or is entrusted to posterity vitiated and deformed, beyond what is acceptable, by vile grammatical mistakes. It thus happens that lacking credibility the amount of praise annuls the testimony and detracts from them as much glory as it adds in falsity going beyond what is appropriate.⁹

The careful and skilful construction of *De situ* testifies to the learning of its author, who was most likely a cleric educated and trained at Milan cathedral.¹⁰ His taste for archaic and rare words, the mastery of speech he displays through the use of a varied range of literary and rhetorical devices, and the skilful use of his sources constitute the red thread sewing the individual chapters together into an overarching narrative. The elegant and refined style conjugated with the borrowing of images, expressions and specific words from authoritative sources also tell us something about the audience targeted by the anonymous author and the milieu in which he was operating.¹¹ The celebration of the glory of the episcopal see of Milan – a church destined for greatness from the very beginning of its history and a city almost equal to Rome according to the testimony of *De situ* – places the writing in a historical context characterised by competition with other Italian metropolitan sees (Ravenna, Aquileia) and close collaboration with the German emperors ruling over the kingdom of Italy between 962 and 1024.¹² While acknowledging the primacy of Rome, the churches of Milan, Aquileia and Ravenna had been competing for centuries for the right to occupy second place in the hierarchy of the metropolitan sees of Italy.¹³ Ravenna and Aquileia could already count on

8 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 5: *Fecit quidem huiusmodi textum de episcopali urbis romane catalogo famosissimus papa Damaseus eiusdem ecclesie, hortante ac flagitante peritissimo Sacre Scripture interprete Yeronimo, qualem ipse pridem de viris illustribus naviter ediderat.* On Jerome's *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, see Wieser and Ward in this volume.

9 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 3-4: *Res mirabiles ac non sine maximo cumulo laudis geste proferantur accipere facultate virtutem. Si qua nempe de excellentioribus ad explicandum gesta inobis verborum vena processit emanare, aut in totum alluvione temporum abolita deperire notitie, aut vilibus dedecora soloecismis deformiora quam decuit ad posteros devenere, fit vero nonnumquam ut fide carens cumulus prerogativam disipet laudum et eis tantum decerpat glorie, quantum plus iusto aliquid falsitatis adiecerit.*

10 On the different attempts at identifying the anonymous author and the time of writing of *De situ*, see Tomea, *Le suggestioni dell'antico*.

11 The rhetorical quality of *De situ* has been highlighted by Schmidt, «Colores rhetorici», 8-9.

12 On the historical context in which the text was written see the classical study by Violante, *La società milanese*.

13 This antagonism is for instance reflected in the fluctuating order of the archbishops' subscriptions in 9th- to 11th-century conciliar proceedings, cf. Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 367-384.

authoritative apostolic traditions that created a direct connection with Rome: both churches claimed to have been founded by disciples of St Peter. The writing of *De situ* therefore constituted an attempt to bypass both metropolitan sees by establishing through St Barnabas – the companion of St Paul chosen by the Holy Spirit – a different apostolic genealogy that could almost rival that of the Roman papacy in honour and prestige.¹⁴

De situ was therefore commissioned to support the political ambitions and the legitimacy of the Milanese Church, an institution that was playing a leading role in the late 10th- and early 11th-century kingdom of Italy. In consideration of that, it does not surprise that it was written at the direct request of the local archbishop, possibly to be identified with Arnulf II (998-1018), who repeatedly tried to assert and strengthen the authority of the Milanese church and its primacy within the Italian kingdom.¹⁵ The choice of a particular literary genre (local history in the form of the *Gesta episcoporum*), the learned construction of the text and the themes developed in the compilation all contribute to shape a powerful narrative appealing to the sense of identity of a community (narrower or wider according to the different levels of understanding and experience of the text) whose pride, claims and ambitions are mirrored and further boosted by *De situ*. This chapter will focus on some of the choices made by the compiler to create a coherent and overarching narrative that built on the individual segments (the bishops' Lives) to convey a powerful image of the city and the Church of Milan. It shall thus shed light on the ways in which the text played on the sense of identity of the Milanese clerical community (the cathedral and diocesan clergy) and the city's inhabitants, and how it was read and understood across time and space. In the last section the discussion shall focus on the possible ways in which readers could access and understand *De situ*: the notions of *community of learning* and *textual community* will be brought forward as useful interpretative tools for the comprehension of the compiler's writing strategies and for their contextualisation within the cultural and social milieu in which the Milanese *De situ* originated and circulated.

The Author's Signature: Rhetoric and Style in De situ

No doubts can be raised concerning the attribution of *De situ* to a single author in the light of the distinct style and the recurrent *topoi* that dominate the fabric of the text. A poetic and elegant metaphor is repeatedly used and alluded to throughout the unfolding of the narrative, to the point that it could almost be considered the author's signature: the metaphor of the sea journey. This beautiful image describes the act of writing and is first evoked in the closing lines of the dedicatory letter.¹⁶

14 On the apostolic traditions promoted in early medieval Italy, see Vocino, *Caccia al discepolo*.

15 Bertolini, Arnolfo. On the dating of *De situ*, see Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 418-431. The same chronological window is proposed by Picard, *Le souvenir*, 450-459. A slightly later dating to the last quarter of the 11th century has been suggested by Busch, *Barnabas, Apostel der Mailänder*.

16 On nautical metaphors describing the act of writing – a common *topos* in ancient and medieval literature – see Curtius, *Europäische Literatur*, 138-141.

The author writes:

I have stated all this in the prologue as if at the beginning of a journey by ship, since I am struck with the fear of an upcoming extraordinary navigation, so that, if by accident I drive the stern into steep sandbanks, indulgence might come easier in consideration of the fact that I so tenaciously asked to be excused for my ignorance.¹⁷

The same metaphor, accompanied by a direct address to the archbishop who commissioned the work and to the readers, is picked up again in the chapter dedicated to the Life of Castritian (third Milanese bishop), in which the compiler extensively borrows from an exegetical commentary written by the late 4th-century Church Father, St Jerome:

I shall thus obey your requests, o glorious father, and with the Holy Spirit blowing – for which I humbly beg – I hoist the sails of this ship [which], if driven by your prayers, might be able to reach the longed-for harbour. For this, I insistingly ask that you repeat this little verse »Awake, o north wind, and come thou south; blow upon my garden, that the scents of our patrons may flow out«¹⁸. To which I shall indeed add the words of the prophet saying »Come Spirit from the four winds and blow upon the prow of this swaying ship«¹⁹. Moreover, to the fastidious reader, or rather to the one who will read our work with hostile spirit, I announce that I shall place in reverse order that which I need to say first, so that if by any chance there is someone who does not believe the things that he is reading, he shall examine what is recounted in other Roman and Greek chronicles, and if they agree he should not scoff at the present work. I declare that indeed I am not weaving and did not weave the whole fabric of this history, but almost as placed in a mirror I transmitted it to those willing to know the testimonies of ancient history.²⁰

Later on, the transition from the Life of Castritian to that of Calimerus (third and fourth bishops of Milan) is marked by the author's direct address to his audience, in which he defends and clarifies his writing strategies focusing on content rather than virtuosity, while nonetheless using an evocative and flamboyant style:

17 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 6: *Hec in proemio velud ad ingressum carine, navigationis insolite ancipitem formidans eventum, idcirco premisi ut michi, si forte in abrupta sircium pupim impigero, facilius adsit indulgentia, quia tam pertinaciter excusare volui de impericia.*

18 Cf. Song of Solomon 4.16.

19 Cf. Ezekiel 37.9.

20 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 38: *Obsequar igitur tuis, pater almifice, iussis, et navis huius, adhuc flante Sancto, ut supplex imploro, Spiritu, vela suspendam, si forte agat ad desiderata litora portus, tuis impulsam precibus. In quibus ut sepius illum versiculum repetas, obnixe deosco: »Surge aquilo et veni auster, perfla ortum meum et fluent aromata nostrorum patronorum«. Quin et ego subinseram interpellans cum propheta et dicens »A quattuor ventis veni Spiritus, et insuffla super vacillantem proram naviculae«. Porro fastidioso lectori, ut quod prius dicere debui prepostero ordine ponam, sive animo perduelli cuiquam nostra lecturo illud ultra supraque denuntio, quatenus in his que relegit, si forte minus credulus existit, perquirat aliarum tam romanorum quam graiorum chronicarum commenta, et si consonant presentia non suggillet. Me autem fateor non plenam hystorie texere vel texuisse materiem, sed quasi in speculo positum nosse cupientibus rei antique indicia protulisse. For the comparison with Jerome's preface to Book XII of his commentary on Ezekiel, which the anonymous author used for the redaction of the passage from *Obsequar* to *denuntio*, see Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Ezechielem*, XII, ed. Glorie, 549.*

I leave out his [i.e. Castritian's] other very admirable deeds for the necessity of abbreviation, as I am approaching other matters. And yet, it would be more prudent to turn this poor writing away from such great deeds given that, whether they read or hear them, present-day scholars enjoy sentences sounding almost like tinkling cymbals and the rhythms of harmonised syllogisms much more than they appreciate the value of the [narrated] deeds. For this reason, we shall direct the naval journey towards those things which are in sight, because we undertook the exploration of the city towards which we sailed not to describe one by one the enormous construction of the ramparts, and its many fortified pinnacles or the defensive machines surrounding its strong walls, but rather to describe briefly the entrance and exit through the gates, and to observe rather than to measure the metal drawbridges. Come then, it is time to consider carefully the nature and greatness of the next gate.²¹

The metaphor of the sea journey not only describes the act of writing but also clarifies the object of the text: the author declares that he decided to focus neither on the fortifications nor the walls of the city but on its gates and more precisely on the entrance and exit through them. Using highly figurative speech, he identifies the bishops with the gates of the imagined city under examination, while the moments of their accession to the episcopacy and their death are presented as the specific objects of the narrative. In the episcopal biographies, the anonymous author indeed focuses on illustrating the circumstances which led to the election of each bishop and those of his death. The last sentences of each individual segment of the narrative (i.e. each Life) thus indicate how many years the bishop held the episcopate and duly note the day of his death and the place of his burial. These coordinates were necessary to make sure the deceased would be actively remembered in the prayers of the local Christian community.²² They also provided two essential pieces of information for the promotion of a new cult: a date for the liturgical commemoration of the late bishop's true birth into eternal life (*dies natalis*) and a burial place where his remains constituted a powerful contact point between earth and heaven, thus turning into powerful relics.²³

In the same passage, the compiler describes his audience and addresses those *novelli auditores* fond of a highly rhetorical style and less attentive to the content of what they read or listen to. The use of the word *auditores* (listeners) and the description of their preferences interestingly identify the specific context in which the compiler expected his work to be read: a group of highly trained scholars whose tastes reflect an advanced education most likely

21 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 46: *Reliqua vero miranda virtutum illius gesta solius causa compendii transeo, quia ad alia festino. Quamquam hic vilior stilus a tam magnis declinare tutius, eo quod presentium temporum novelli auditores vocalioribus sententiis quasi tinnientibus cymbalis multo amplius delectentur, et silogismorum magis consonantium modulis, queque legerint vel audierint, quam rerum gestarum pondere metiantur. Quam ob rem, ad ea que in prospectu sunt navalem cursum dirigamus, quia urbis quam adnavimus exploratum, non inormes propugnaculorum materies, et turrite illius multiplices minas, vel circum ductas muris fortissimis machinas viritim describendas, sed portarum solummodo introitus et egressus brevi calamo designandos, cataractasque fusiles potius adnotandas quam dimetiendas suscepimus. Age ergo, porta que sequitur qualis quantaque sit attentius perpensetur.*

22 The practice of reciting the names of dead bishops during the liturgy of the Mass is attested since late antiquity: episcopal catalogues inscribed on diptychs and recorded in various types of manuscripts are believed to have been later developed into the new medieval genre of the *Gesta episcoporum*, to which *De situ* also belongs; see Sot, *Local and Institutional History*, 94–96. However, it should be noted that simple catalogues of bishops continued to be kept and updated across the Middle Ages regardless of the production of local *Gesta episcoporum*.

23 On the ways in which new saints were created and how their cults were validated, see Klaniczay, *Using Saints*.

achieved in the local cathedral school, that is in one of the major centres of learning in the Italian kingdom.²⁴ Even when pointing out the risks of an exceedingly grandiloquent style, the author could not avoid operating in a cultural, intellectual and literary framework in which sophisticated rhetorical writing was common currency; his many references and quotations to those classical and late antique authors that formed the early medieval curriculum of studies (universally studied authors such as Virgil and Isidore of Seville are joined by more local ones such as Ennodius of Pavia and Paul the Deacon) clearly situate him in the school traditions and didactic programmes of his time.²⁵ However, the borrowings from a varied range of texts and their skilful weaving into the narrative pattern transcend a pure demonstrative display of the author's culture and learning: they substantiate a particular image of the city and the community that are celebrated in *De situ*.

A History of Glorious Origins and Unbroken Continuity

The unity and cohesion of *De situ* is not only based on the literary and stylistic uniformity of its writing but also on the stress put on the unfolding of an unbroken timeline grafting the origins and the early centuries of the Milanese church onto the sacred history of salvation. This history started with Jesus Christ's coming and was continued by the divinely sanctioned early apostolic missions entrusted with the preaching of the Gospel across the world.²⁶ The mission of St Barnabas, the founder of the Milanese church, started in the East within the small community of Christ's disciples in Jerusalem, as is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.²⁷ But the Bible did not reveal what had happened to Barnabas from the moment he parted from St Paul's company. Developing an early Christian tradition that located Barnabas in Rome, the compiler turned him into the first Apostle to preach in the imperial capital, thus presenting the founder of the Milanese Church as the predecessor by some 20 years of the Roman patron saints, Peter and Paul.²⁸ From Rome Barnabas finally reached the imperial city of Milan, where he met a pious man of Greek descent, Anatelon, whom he eventually designated as co-apostle and consecrated to the episcopal office while also sanctioning the primacy of the Milanese see in the region.²⁹ The metropolitan rank of the city is therefore directly linked to its apostolic origin, a connection that many cities strove to establish in order

24 Regarding Milan as a leading centre of learning and culture in the 11th century, see Cowdrey, Anselm of Besate, and for a wider chronological frame Viscardi, *La cultura milanese*. For an analysis highlighting the abundant local manuscript production before the year 1000, see Ferrari, *Manoscritti e cultura*, while on the 11th and 12th century *eadem*, *Produzione libraria*.

25 On the literary borrowings integrated into the dedicatory letter attached to *De situ*, see for instance Tomea, *Le suggestioni dell'antico*. Citations from earlier texts – although more can be identified today with the help of databases – are signalled in the apparatus of *De situ*'s critical edition.

26 The historical narrative of *De situ* starts precisely with the ascension of Jesus Christ and the miraculous conversion of St Paul as it is related in the Acts of the Apostles; *De Situ*, ed. Colombo, 14-17. For an overview of the many possible uses and developments of the biblical episode focusing on the parting of Christ's disciples (the so-called *divisio apostolorum*), see Levillayer, *L'usage du thème apocryphe*.

27 While St Paul only briefly mentions Barnabas in his letters (I Cor. 9.6; Col. 4.10 and Gal. 2.1.9 and 13), the Acts of the Apostles offer more information on his travels (Act. 4.36-37; 9.27; 11.22-30, 12.25; 13.1-51; 14.1-28 and 15.1-39).

28 On the probable use by the author of Greek catalogues listing Christ's disciples and their respective missions, see Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 323-334.

29 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 20.

to justify their legitimacy and jurisdiction over large ecclesiastical provinces. Such political operations often originated in situations of open competition with rival Churches that were mostly concerned with juridical and jurisdictional issues.³⁰ A similar historical scenario – Milan trying to assert its rights in northern Italy at the expense of the metropolitan churches of Aquileia and Ravenna – constitutes precisely the context in which *De situ* saw the light.³¹

Moreover, the link between local (Milanese) history and the universal sacred history of salvation rests on the consecration of the first bishop of Milan by an apostle who had directly been invested with his mission by the Holy Spirit. Barnabas chose Anatelon for his moral virtues (honesty and faith) and mentored him, thus establishing a relationship in which legitimacy and orthodoxy are passed on from teacher (*magister*) to disciple. It is on the unbroken succession of teachers and disciples that the compiler built the line of continuity and inscribed the Milanese Church onto the apostolic genealogy that connected it directly to Christ – and hence the source of revelation – through Barnabas' mission. The second Milanese bishop, Gaius, whom the compiler describes as Anatelon's co-disciple (*condiscipulus*), is first elevated to the order of priesthood and then designated by Anatelon to succeed him in the episcopal office. Among Gaius' disciples is Castritian; he was ordained a priest by the bishop and was elected to succeed the latter after his death with the consensus of both the clergy and the local Christian people (*consensu universus clerus et omnis christicolarum populus*). Similarly, Calimerus is co-opted by Castritian and integrated into the group of his disciples. He is later chosen for the episcopal office because in him the Milanese community saw the reflection of the same virtues and orthodox doctrine of his master. A connection between master and pupil based on education, righteous morality and orthodox doctrine is also said to underlie the following episcopal succession (Calimerus-Monas), while the transition from Monas to Maternus – the last one to be narrated in *De situ* – is described by reference to the biblical prophets Elijah and Elisha, the latter disciple and spiritual son of the former.³² Why would the compiler insist on presenting each Milanese bishop as the disciple of his predecessor? The importance attached to the continuity of the episcopal lineage and the handing over of orthodox doctrine from bishop to bishop clearly strengthened and added legitimacy to the connection between the Church of Milan and the source of revelation springing from the very place (Jerusalem and Palestine) where the history of Christianity originated.³³ No disruption endangered the progression of the *ecclesia Mediolanensis* on the path to salvation, and the carefully laid out structure of the narrative enhances this sense of glorious destiny inscribed in the unfolding Christian history of Milan. Moreover, the main duty of a bishop, namely to be a teacher to the clergy and the community under his care, is thus brought to the fore, presenting an ideal portrait in which the pastoral quality of the episcopal office emerges as a prominent feature.³⁴

30 See again Vocino, *Caccia al discepolo*.

31 Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 367-384.

32 As Elisha had been blessed by God with a double portion of Elijah's spirit (2 Kings 2), similarly Maternus had inherited the virtues of Monas in double proportion, thus deserving to be chosen by the Milanese clergy; *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 63.

33 The construction of narrative unbroken lines of succession connecting local churches to Christ is a feature often observed in hagiographies produced in early medieval Italy; see for instance the Life of St Syrus of Pavia – the capital of the Italian kingdom and a city within Milan's metropolitan jurisdiction – composed in the context of competition with Milan; Vocino, *Caccia al discepolo*, 378-382; *eadem*, *La leggenda dimenticata*.

34 It is worthy of note that the Church Father and patron saint of Milan, St Ambrose (d. 397), believed indeed that teaching was the main duty attached to the episcopal office, as he stated in Ambrose, *De officiis* I, trans. Davidson, 119.

The same strategy can be observed in the progressive institutionalisation of the Milanese Church and the transition from the pagan to a Christian topography of the city. In the description of Milan used as a preface to the historical narrative, the author recalls the local urban landmarks delineating the pre-Christian city: the palaces, theatre, amphitheatre, baths and gardens built by Roman emperors are offered as evidence of the high rank of Milan in the hierarchy of the imperial towns. These are progressively substituted by holy places (e.g. miraculous wells), sanctuaries and churches, which defined the topography of the Christian city born thanks to Barnabas' preaching and thriving under his successors. A similar narrative development can be observed in the drawing of the steadily growing metropolitan province over which the jurisdiction of Milan stretched and of the progressive institutionalisation of the episcopal Church that accompanied the organisation of the ecclesiastical orders and the many offices related to the functioning of a metropolitan see (e.g. the mention of the rather specialised office of the *primicerius lectorum*, i.e. head of the minor order of the lectors, held by Maternus prior to his episcopal election).

The stress put by the compiler on continuity and the careful construction of an overarching plot allow the city of Milan to emerge as the main character of *De situ*. This indicates that the work was meant to be something more than the juxtaposition of episcopal biographies ordered according to a chronological principle. As demonstrated by the title of the compilation recorded in the manuscript preserving the entire text,³⁵ *De situ* was composed to provide a testimony to the glory of Milan and its Church through the recounting of its Christian history, which was articulated in individual chapters dedicated to the city's leaders, that is the bishops. The visibility given in the narrative to Milan – an ancient imperial capital and a key political centre in the 10th-century kingdom of Italy – perfectly locates *De situ* within the genre of local histories. Their popularity in politically fragmented worlds is not exclusive to the Christian West and their composition is a phenomenon that can be observed across Eurasia: for instance, the historiography produced in post-Carolingian Europe shows interesting parallels with the works written in the Islamic post-Abbasid world.³⁶ One can only agree with Franz Rosenthal, eminent specialist of Islamic historiography, who in 1952 wrote: »local history has at all times been a favourite literary expression of group consciousness«. ³⁷ Face-to-face communities whose identities are firmly rooted in a given geographical and institutional landscape (a monastery, an episcopal city, a religious sect etc.), would therefore naturally privilege the writing of histories in which the chronologically arranged narrative enhances the visibility of the most prominent local actors and landmarks. As people and places become quintessential, the integration of biographies emerges as a viable and a pertinent choice available to the authors. In this sense, *De situ* shares the same ordering principles of other works analysed in this volume, and its analysis highlights the historiographical dimension of biographical collections: the overarching history transcends the individual lives weaved into the narrative fabric and confers unity and cohesion to the whole.

35 See below n. 40.

36 In the same period, the *Ta'rikh Jurjān* was written by Al-Sahmī (d. 1045); local pride is here explicitly derived from the settlement in Jurjān of the Companions of the Prophet, who in a cross-cultural comparison could be set side by side with the apostles. On local historiography in the medieval Islamic world, see Robinson, *Islamic historiography*, 138-142.

37 Rosenthal, *A History*, 150.

Once we recognise that the stress is placed on the history of Milan and its Church (infallibly geared towards salvation) rather than on the individual biographical segments, the literary and narrative construction of *De situ* can be easily accounted for. The bishops' Lives are not meant to be full-fledged biographies but carefully chosen segments focusing on the crucial moments of transition in which the episcopal office was handed over from one holder to the successor. Each link needed to be securely welded to the next one in an unbreakable episcopal chain. Moreover, if we consider *De situ* to be an interconnected coherent historiographical work, the introductory presentation of Milan, dedicated to the retelling of its pre-Christian origins (Gallic and Roman, ethnic and imperial) together with the enumeration of the many qualities of the city and its inhabitants, also emerges as the obvious first chapter in the glorious history of Milan (the ›stage zero‹ of the narrative plot).³⁸ *De situ* can therefore be rightfully located within the genre of Christian historiography (the *Gesta episcoporum* being a form of local history, as stressed above), and this is confirmed by the author's indirect comparison of his work to those of other chroniclers (*chronographi*).³⁹ And yet, the reception of this history of Milan demonstrates that the original authorial design was only respected in a few cases. The complex textual transmission of *De situ* is a reflection of its flexible narrative structure and composition, which lent themselves to different readings, functions and uses, to which we shall now turn.

The Multiform Medieval Reception of De situ

Of the 17 extant manuscripts and two incunables transmitting *De situ* and produced in the Middle Ages, only one still contains the work in its entirety.⁴⁰ The manuscript (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, H 56 sup.) is a late witness of the text, dating to the 15th century and copied from an early 15th-century exemplar (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, D 26 inf.), which most likely also originally contained the entire compilation (the first 25 sheets are now lost and the manuscript as preserved starts in the middle of the Life of the sixth Milanese bishop, Maternus).⁴¹ Interestingly, this mutilated early 15th-century copy was assembled by a Milanese humanist, Michele Pizolpasso, to be offered to his uncle, the archbishop of Milan Francesco Pizolpasso (1423-35).⁴² It is not by chance that *De situ* in its entirety was preserved

38 This section of *De situ* is modelled on a popular rhetorical genre in medieval Italy, the so-called ›Praises of cities‹ (*Laudes urbium*). On its features, see Fasoli, *La coscienza civica* as well as Granier, *La renovatio* du modèle rhétorique.

39 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 3.

40 For an overview of the entire manuscript transmission of *De situ*, see Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 19-33.

41 Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 28-29. On the relation between the two manuscripts, see also Ferrari, *Un bibliotecario milanese*, 204 n. 95 and 211-212. For the description of both *codices*, see Colombo, *I codici ambrosiani e austriaci*, CVIII-CXII.

42 Its content can be reconstructed through a comparison with its later copy (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, H 56 sup.): ff. [1r-25v]: Dedicatory letter addressed by Michele Pizolpasso to his uncle Francesco Pizolpasso, archbishop of Milan, followed by *De situ* introduced by the title ›History of the description and name of the Milanese city (*Historia de situ et vocabulo urbis Mediolanensis*), of the visitation of the most blessed apostle Barnabas, who had been divinely directed there, and also of the venerable man Anaton, who was his co-apostle and contemporary, and was consecrated in that very place by his (i.e. Barnabas') episcopal blessing, and also of some of his successors‹. ff. 26r-31v: [Life of] Maternus (316-28), i.e. the final chapter of *De situ*. The Life is mutilated at the beginning. ff. 31v-38v: On the exile and death of saint Dionysius, *bishop of Milan (349-55)*. ff. 39r-41v: Life of saint Eustorgius, *bishop of Milan (c. 343-49)*. ff. 42r-55r: Life of saint Ambrose, *bishop and patron saint of Milan (374-97)*. ff. 55v-88v: Chronicle of the Milanese archbishops written around 1318.

in a book entirely dedicated to the history of the Milanese bishops. The manuscript built namely on the narrative of *De situ* by adding the Lives of the three following bishops (Dionysius, Eustorgius and Ambrose) and an early 14th-century chronicle covering the entire series of episcopal Lives from Barnabas to Aicardus (d. 1339). The internal organisation of the manuscript responds to the declaration contained in *De situ*'s dedicatory letter in which the compiler voiced his intention to bring the narrative up to the present times. Michele Pizolpasso thus decided to develop the history of the Milanese church from the point in which *De situ* stopped by adding pertinent texts and placing them in chronological order. The decision to compile such a book and offer it to the Milanese archbishop in response to the latter's request also mirrors the circumstances that led to the composition of *De situ* in the first place.

If two out of the 17 medieval manuscripts preserving *De situ* seem to have respected the intention of the author and the original vocation of the text, the large majority of the extant witnesses used the work in pursuit of other strategies and purposes. The earliest surviving copy (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, C 133 inf.) is a miscellaneous manuscript produced in 11th-century Milan, possibly in the cathedral scriptorium.⁴³ The first codicological unit contains the chapters dedicated to Barnabas and the six bishops, but does not include the dedicatory letter and the description of Milan that constitute the first two narrative segments of *De situ*. The account of St Barnabas' coming to Milan is here preceded by an episcopal catalogue recording the names of the Milanese archbishops from Anatelon to Tedaldus (d. 1085), a list that was updated by different hands until the 15th century. The Life of Maternus (last chapter of *De situ*) is followed by two Lives of St Dionysius (4th-century bishop of Milan), a funerary speech written by St Ambrose (d. 397) in honour of his brother Satyrus (who enjoyed a Milanese cult), a few texts dedicated to St Martin of Tours (venerated in Milan), a number of sermons and hagiographic texts celebrating locally venerated saints (the martyrs Nazarius and Celsus, St Laurent, St Cyprian, St Eusebius) and a series of homilies illustrating passages from the Gospels.⁴⁴ *De situ* seems here to fulfil a very different purpose: the manuscript could be described as a hybrid homiliary-legendary collecting sermons and hagiographic texts celebrating Milanese local saints and feast days⁴⁵. It is not surprising that we are dealing with a book produced in the local cathedral scriptorium.

A different possible understanding and use of *De situ* is shown by yet another Milanese manuscript copied in the 12th century (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, I 152 inf.), which contains the so-called *Ordo et caerimoniae Ecclesiae Ambrosianae Mediolanensis* (a guide to the liturgical ceremonies to be performed by the archbishop at the Milanese cathedral) compiled by Beroldus, one of the cathedral officials (*custos et cicendelarius*).⁴⁶ While the manuscript gathers a heterogeneous group of texts (the *Ordo*, sections of *De situ*, but also explanations and commentaries on various rites and prayers as well as descriptions of clerical vestments

43 Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 21.

44 For a full description of the contents of the manuscript see the online catalogue of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana: ambrosiana.comperio.it/opac/detail/view/ambro:catalog:30119 last accessed on 31 March 2022.

45 The hagiographic treatment and use of *De situ* in the manuscript is also confirmed by the continuation and completion of the Life of Maternus in the margins by a later hand, which included the fundamental reference to the saint's *dies natalis* (date of death for liturgical celebration).

46 On Beroldo's *Ordo* and its earliest copy, see Ferrari, Valutazione paleografica and Forzatti Golia, *Le raccolte di Beroldo*.

and orders), the choice and organisation of the material nonetheless disclose a homogeneous and coherent design. The dedicatory letter, the description of the city of Milan, the coming of St Barnabas and the Life of the first Milanese bishop, Anaton, are the only sections of *De situ* copied in the manuscript, showing that this time it was the *History of the Christian origins of Milan* that mattered to the book's designer. The stress is put on the illustration of the institutional rank of the Milanese church, the origins of and justification for which are linked to the imperial past of the city and the apostolic foundation of its Church. Within the scope of this particular manuscript, *De situ* offered the necessary evidence for the pre-eminence of the metropolitan see of Milan and exalted its identity, honour and prestige by celebrating the apostolic foundation of the Milanese bishopric. The manuscript can therefore be understood as a collection supporting the legitimacy of the Church of Milan and strengthening its institutional identity; the dignity of its archbishop, the organisation of its clergy, its unique liturgy and understanding of the rituals are brought forward as the many features defining and distinguishing the Church and city of Milan within the Italian landscape. The insertion of the first chapters of *De situ* was therefore a pertinent choice as they naturally supported and substantiated the ecclesiological ideology underpinning the overall design of this 12th-century manuscript.

If the three manuscripts briefly discussed are Milanese products, it should not be forgotten that *De situ* also circulated outside the city of Milan. The individual episcopal biographies were also transmitted as part of very comprehensive hagiographic collections, such as the legendary of the Premonstratensian canonry of Windberg in Lower Bavaria (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 22242, 12th century), the *Magnum Legendarium Austriacum* (henceforth *MLA*, with manuscripts from Heiligenkreuz, Zwettl, Lilienfeld and Melk) and the »Klosterneuburg Legendary«, a 14th-century collection derived from the *MLA*.⁴⁷ In these hagiographic collections the chronological timeline of *De situ* was broken and the individual biographical chapters were reshuffled and ordered according to the position of the bishops' feast days in the liturgical calendar. The episcopal biographies were thus no longer nourishing the pride of the local Milanese community, but they were nonetheless considered relevant material to be integrated in a hagiographic compilation with a prominent encyclopaedic vocation such as the *MLA*.⁴⁸

De situ therefore enjoyed a considerable dissemination within and beyond medieval Milan and proved to be an extremely versatile text as it fulfilled different functions and was used for multiple goals (political, ecclesiological, liturgical, historiographical). In the last section of this chapter I shall finally briefly discuss *De situ* in light of two particular social anthropological concepts applied to the community in which the text existed. The work will thus be situated in the political, social and cultural framework in which it originated and that it contributed to shaping.

47 Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 23-25 and 28-29.

48 On this collection, see Ó Riain, *The Magnum Legendarium*; *idem*, *Neue Erkenntnisse*.

Communities of Learning *and* Textual Communities:

A Social Anthropological Approach to De situ

While a political, religious or social approach is often privileged, the cultural framework in which a community exists and its contribution to the strengthening of a sense of shared identity and belonging have increasingly come to scholarly attention in the last decades. In this regard, the introduction to a volume published in 2011 provides the following definition of a key concept: a *community of learning* is »the framework in which ideas are developed and exchanged« and each one of these communities »attached particular importance to some discipline and to some set of texts«. ⁴⁹ Alongside this idea there is the notion of a *textual community* first developed by Brian Stock in his study of heretical groups, among which he singled out the popular movement known as Pataria that led to civil war within the 11th- and 12th-century city of Milan. ⁵⁰ Stock's *textual communities* can be roughly defined as »societies organised around the common understanding of a text«: the contact with this authoritative text is often oral, its understanding is an educative process and the purpose of the reading is to historicise the community by giving it a past, which identifies it in the present. ⁵¹

Some features of *De situ* indicate that the text did indeed exist within specific *communities of learning* and *textual communities* within which it was accessed, experienced and understood. As I pointed out in the first section of this study, *De situ* is an impressive concentration of references and allusions to other texts. The work is not extraordinary in this respect as more or less explicit borrowings from other texts are a constant feature in medieval works. ⁵² And yet, the ways in which references and allusions are integrated into the text fabric tell us something about the cultural and intellectual framework in which the author operated. The model used for the compilation is spelled out (the Roman *Liber Pontificalis*), thus lending authority to *De situ*, and the Bible is – unsurprisingly – often quoted and alluded to. However, these are not the only texts put to use by the anonymous compiler and, despite the fact that he never explicitly identifies them (for instance providing the name of the author or the title), he relied on them for both content and style. In some cases the Lives of the Milanese bishops develop upon information that was available in the hagiographies dedicated to saints venerated in neighbouring cities (Innocent of Tortona, Syrus of Pavia, Faustinus and Iovita of Brescia), but in most cases the compiler used his sources primarily as cultural and stylistic references. ⁵³ The prologue to the Life of St Epiphanius of Pavia is for instance repeatedly alluded to in *De situ*; the text was written by Ennodius, an early 6th-century bishop of Pavia

49 Mews and Crossley (eds.), *Communities of Learning*, 1.

50 Stock, *Implications of Literacy*.

51 Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 23-26.

52 On the ways in which hagiographers collected and used their sources for the production of new texts, see for instance Dolbeau, *Les hagiographes au travail*.

53 Schmidt, «Colores rhetorici», 7-10; Tomea, *Le suggestioni dell'antico*; *idem*, *Tradizione apostolica*, 334-366.

who had been trained in Milan and was considered to be one of the last paragons of classical culture and learning.⁵⁴ It is precisely Ennodius' elaborate and highly rhetorical prose that is imitated in *De situ*. The same can be said for two other popular hagiographies, written in the 5th and 6th centuries, from which the Milanese author borrowed sentences and vocabulary without openly referencing the sources: the epistolary preface to the Life of St Martin by Sulpicius Severus and the Life of St Hilary compiled by the Italian poet Venantius Fortunatus.⁵⁵

Far from being a passive and unoriginal approach revealing a lack of creativity on the part of the author of *De situ*, the ways in which he borrowed from these texts and reused their vocabulary shows a skilful handling of the sources, which are transfigured into a new original compilation. It would be naive to think that this was done without the assumption that at least part of his audience (the bishop who commissioned the work and the community that would read *De situ*) would be able to recognise those stylistic references and furthermore to appreciate the literary allusions to precisely those saints' Lives (St Martin and St Hilary) and authors (Ennodius of Pavia) known for their connection to Milan. After all, hagiographic texts were most likely read at least once every year on those saints' feast days, and the Milanese clergy was undoubtedly familiar with them. The same could be said also for those individuals who had been trained in the city cathedral and lived alongside clerics without having themselves been ordained. The choice of works reused in *De situ* therefore appealed not only to the grammatical and rhetorical skills of the target audience but also to their cultural identity, which rested on the shared knowledge of a set of texts, the awareness of which strengthened their sense of belonging to the same *community of learning*. This community would be aware and proud of its inheritance of a highly refined classical and late antique culture, embodied by authors such as Ennodius, and therefore undoubtedly applauded the inscription of its own history into widely acknowledged, long-standing and prestigious literary traditions.⁵⁶

Furthermore, if we direct our attention to the author's addresses to the potential audience of *De situ* and analyse the rhetorical construction of the text, we can safely assume that he expected his work to be read by skilled scholars in the arts of speech (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic) capable of detecting, weighting and criticising the literary qualities of his work – and maybe even of learning something from its analysis.⁵⁷ Those readers could only belong to the group of learned men trained in the cathedral school, which, at the time, provided the most advanced education in the liberal arts, as shown by the literary products of those authors who are known to have been instructed there in the 10th and 11th centuries.⁵⁸ *De situ*

54 On Ennodius and his cultural refinement, see Kennell, *Magnus Felix Ennodius*. For the text of the *Vita Epiphani*, see Ennodius of Pavia, *Vita Epiphani*, ed. Cesa.

55 For the borrowings integrated into the dedicatory letter, see again Tomea, *Suggerimenti dell'antico*.

56 The social prestige attached to refined rhetorical culture in early 11th-century Milan is illustrated by the career and literary output of Anselm of Besate, a cleric trained in the Milanese cathedral, who became chancellor of the German emperor Henry III (1046-1056). He wrote a handbook for the study of rhetoric, which unfortunately has not survived, as well as a fictional controversy written according to the genre and techniques of classical oratory; see Violante, *Anselmo da Besate and Bennett, Teaching Classical Rhetoric*.

57 *De situ*, ed. Colombo, 46, see above n. 15.

58 An extensive description of the education provided at the cathedral inner and outer schools can be read in the *History of Milan* written by Landulf Senior in the late 11th century; see Landulf Senior, *Historia Mediolanensis*, ed. Bethmann and Wattenbach, 70-71, cf. Witt, *Two Latin Cultures*, 121 and 124-126.

could be and most likely was approached in two ways: the author clearly expected his work not only to be read but also to be listened to. The use of literary devices such as prose rhythm (the *cursus*) and specific rhetorical figures (e.g. alliteration, anaphora) were most efficacious when it came to oral reading performances, and this in turn invites the possibility that those »listeners« (*auditores*) who did not possess the advanced learning and skills for an autonomous reading and full understanding of *De situ* could still access and experience the text. Although such »passive readers« might not have been equipped to fully appreciate the rhetorical and stylistic qualities of the text – but could nonetheless be impressed by its sophisticated nature – they too would have participated in the transmission and sharing of the ideas heralded in *De situ*. Origin stories were powerful narratives, and their impact in the construction of medieval communities and in the strengthening of their identities has been convincingly demonstrated.⁵⁹ The history of the apostolic origins of Milan could serve a similar function, rallying the Church and the city of Milan behind the banner of St Barnabas in a time of open competition with rival metropolitan sees in northern Italy.⁶⁰ *De situ* therefore presumes the existence of a *textual community* in which oral communication was a powerful medium: the cathedral community and more generally the Milanese community of the faithful attending the cathedral's services (for instance the liturgical commemoration of local saints) could both, despite their different degrees of understanding and social articulation, be considered *textual communities*. Through a combination of literacy and orality, a Milanese community including learned and less skilled readers and listeners could come to know and understand its own history, which in turn nourished its sense of identity by giving it a glorious past, the reflection of which could be found in the present.

The concepts of *community of learning* and *textual community* thus provide two useful interpretative tools for the comprehension of the historical context, the social milieu and the cultural framework within which *De situ* was composed and read. The construction of a cohesive historiographical narrative articulated as a series of biographies naturally lent itself to the representation of a community, both idealised and real, to which the author and its audience adhered. The lasting success of *De situ*, which is surprising given its unfinished form, resided in the efficacious construction of both a powerful overarching narrative and compelling biographical stories which spoke to multiple communities: an institutionalised community (as organised in the Milanese cathedral), a restricted but less formalised grouping (the *community of learning* of the scholarly elites) and finally a larger, socially comprehensive community (the *textual community* of the clergy and the faithful inhabitants of Milan). The anonymous compiler of *De situ* was indeed a master of speech and, beyond his skilled use of rhetorical devices, his most impressive achievement comprised the ability to communicate at various levels, to reach different audiences across time and place and to make his work fit for multiple strategies, functions and goals. And it cannot be an understatement to say that the main ingredient for such a successful recipe resided precisely in the *one and many-in-one* narrative structure of that complex work of literature and historiography that is the *Libellus de situ civitatis Mediolani*.

59 It is sufficient to recall here the studies dedicated to the historical genre known as the *Origines gentium*: the belief in a common origin and the sense of a shared history constitute strong criteria cementing the solidarity of ethnic societies, groups and peoples; see for instance Pohl, *Strategies of Identification*. The same function was fulfilled across medieval Europe by hagiographic foundation legends providing local urban, ecclesiastical and monastic communities with a shared history and identity; the articles gathered in this volume provide ample evidence for this phenomenon.

60 See the concluding remarks in Tomea, *Tradizione apostolica*, 418-431.

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Abbreviations

MLA: *Magnum Legendarium Austriacum*

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